The Girl from His Town

by Marie Van Vorst

ILLUSTRATIONS by M. G. KETTNER

She was standing listlessly by the table. A mass of letters sent by spe-

The Boy Flung the Contents Full in the Hungarian's Face.

cial messenger from Loudon after her, telegrams and cards lay there in a pile. Looking down at the lot, she murmured: "All right, I don't care."

He concealed his triumph, but before the look had faded from his face she saw it and exclaimed sharply:

"Don't be crazy about it, you know. You'll have to pay high for me; you know what I mean."

He answered gallantly: "My dear child, I've told you that you would be the most charming princess in Hungary."

Once more she accepted indifferently: "All right, all right, I don't care tuppence—not tuppence"—and she snapped her fingers; "but I like to see you pay, Frederigo. Take me to Maxim's."

He demurred, saying she was far too ill, but she turned from him to call Higgins, determined to go if she had to go alone, and said to him violently: "Don't think I'll make your life easy for you, Frederigo. I'll make it wretched; as wretched—" and she held out her fragile arms, and the sleeves fell back, leaving them bare—"as wretched as I am myself."

But she was lovely, and he said harshly: "Get yourself dressed. I'll go change and meet you at the lift."

She made him take a table in the corner, where she sat in the shadow on the sofa, overlooking the brilliant room. Maxim's was no new scene to either of them, no novelty. Poniotowsky scarcely glanced at the crowd, preferring to feast his eyes on his companion, whose indifference to him made his abstraction easy. She was his property. He would give her his title; she had demanded it from the first. The Hungarian was a little overdressed, with his jeweled buttons, his large boutonniere, his faultless clothes, his single eye-glass through which he stared at Letty Lane, whose delicate beauty was in fine play; her cheeks faintly pink, her starry eyes sumid with a dew whose luster is of the most precious quality. Her unshed tears had nothing to do with Poniotowsky—they were for the boy. Her heart sickened, thinking where he might be; and more than that, it cried out for him. She wanted him.

Oh, she would have been far better for Dan than anything he could find in this mad city, than anything to which in his despair he could go for consolation. She had kept her word, however, to that old man, Mr. Ruggles; she had got out of the business with a fatal result, as far as the boy was concerned. She thought Dan would drift here probably as most Americans on their wild nights do for a part of the time, and she had come to see.

She wore a dress of coral pink, tightly fitting, high to her little chin, and seemed herself like a coral strand from neck to toe, clad in the color she affected, and which had become celebrated as the Letty Lane pink. Her feathered hat hid her face, and she was completely shielded as she bent down drawing pictures with her bare finger on the cloth. After a little while she said to Poniotowsky without glancing at him:

"If you stare any longer like that, Frederigo, you'll break your eye-glass. You know how I hate it."

Used as he was to her sharpness, he nevertheless flushed and sat back and looked across the room, where, to their right, protected from them as they were from him by the great door, a young man sat alone. Whether or not he had come to Maxim's intending to join a congenial party, should he find one, or to choose for a companion some one of the women who, at the entrance of the tall blond boy, stirred and invited him with their raised lorgnons and their smiles, will not be known. Dan Blair was alone, pale as the pictures Letty Lane had drawn on the cloth, and he, too, feasted his eyes on the Gaiety girl.

"By Jove!" said the Hungarian under his breath, and she eagerly asked: "What? Whom? Whom do you see?"

Turning his back sharply he evaded her question and she did not pursue the idea, and as a physical weakness overwhelmed her when Poniotowsky after a second said: "Come, cherie, for heaven's sake, let's go"—she mechanically rose and passed out.

Several young men supping together came over eagerly to speak to her and claim acquaintance with the Gaiety girl, and walked along out to the motor. There Letty Lane discovered she had dropped her handkerchief, and sent the prince back for it.

As though he had been waiting for the reappearance of Poniotowsky, Dan Blair stood close to the little table which Letty Lane had left, her handkerchief in his hand. As Poniotowsky came up Dan thrust the small trifle of sheer linen into his waistcoat pocket.

"I will trouble you for Miss Lane's handkerchief," said Poniotowsky, his eyes cold.

"You may," said Dan as quietly, his blue eyes like sparks from a star, "trouble me for hell!" And lifting from the table Poniotowsky's own half-emptied glass of champagne, the boy flung the contents full in the Hungarian's face.

The wine dashed against Ponitowsky's lips and in his eyes. Blair laughed out loud, his hands in his pockets. The insult was low and noiseless; the little glass shattered as it fell so softly that with the music its gentle crash was unheard.

Poniotowsky wiped his face tranquilly and bowed.

"You shall hear from me after I have taken Miss Lane home."

"Tell her," said the boy, "where you left the handkerchief, that's all."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Such Stuff as Dreams.

Dan was in his room at the hotel. He woke and then slept again. Nothing seemed strange to him—nothing seemed real. It was three o'clock in the morning, the rumble of Paris was dull; it did not disturb him, for he seemed without the body and to have grown giantlike, and to fill the room. He had a sense of suffocation and the need to break through the windows and to escape into ether.

The entrance of Poniotowsky's two friends was a part with the unreal naturalness. One was a Roumanian, the other a Frenchman—both spoke fluent English. Dan, his eyes fixed on the foreign faces, only half saw them; they blurred, their voices were small and far away. Finally he said:

"All right, all right, I can shoot well enough; this kind of thing isn't our custom, you know—I'd as soon kill him one way as another, as a matter of fact. No, I don't know a darned soul here." There was a confab incomprehensible to Dan. "It's all one to me, gentlemen," he said. "I'd rather not drag in my friends. Fix it up to suit yourselves."

He wanted them to go—to be alone—to stretch his arms, to rid himself of the burden of sense and be free. And after they had left, he remained in his window till dawn. It came soon, midsummer dawn, a singularly tender morning in his heart. His mind worked with great rapidity. He had made his will in the States. He wished he could have left everything to Letty Lane, but if, as Ruggles said, he was a pauper? Perhaps it wasn't a lie after all. Dan had written and telegraphed Ruggles asking for the solemn truth, and also telling him where he was and asking the older man to come over. If Ruggles proved he was poor, why, some of his burden was gone. His money had been a burden, he knew it now. He might have no use for money the next day. What good could it do him in a fix like this? He was to meet Poniotowsky at five o'clock in a place whose name he couldn't recall. He had seen it advertised, though; people went there for lunch.

They were to shoot at twenty-five paces—he might be a Rockefeller or a beggar for all the good his money could do him in a pinch like this.

His father wouldn't approve, the old man wouldn't approve, but he had sent him here to learn the ways of the old world. A flickering smile crossed his beautiful, set face. His lessons hadn't done him much good; he would like to have seen good old Gordon Galorey again; he loved him—he had no use for Ruggles no use—it had been all his fault. His mind reached out to his father, and the old man's words came dinning back: "Buy the things that stay above ground, my boy." What were those things? He had thought they were passion—he had thought they were love, and he had put all on one woman. She couldn't stand by him, now that he was poor.

The spasm in his heart was so sharp that he made a low sound in his throat and leaned against the casing of the window. He must see her, touch her once more.

The fellows Poniotowsky's seconds had chosen to be Dan's representatives came in to "fix him up." They were in frock coats and carried their silk hats and their gloves. He could have laughed at them. Then they made him think of undertakers, and his blood grew cold. He handled the revolvers with care and interest.

"I'm not going to let him murder me, you know," he told his seconds.

They helped him to dress, at least one of them did, while the other took Dan's place by the window and looked to the boy like a figure of death.

The hour was getting on; he heard his own motor drive up, and they went down, through the deserted hotel. The men who had consented to act for Dan regarded their principal curiously. He wasn't pale, there was a brightness on his face.

"Partons," said one of them, and told Blair's chauffeur where to go and how to run. "Partons."

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Picture of It All.

As far as his knowing anything of the customs of it all, it was like leading a lamb to slaughter.

Villebon, lovely, vernal, at a later hour the spot for gay breakfasts and gentle rendezvous, had been designated for the meeting between Dan and Poniotowsky. There in his motor he gave up his effort to set his thoughts clear. Nothing settled down. Even the ground they flew over, the trees with their chestnut plumes, blurred, were indistinct, nebulous, as if seen through a diving-bell under the sea. Fear—he didn't know the word. He wasn't afraid—it wasn't that; yet he had a certainty that it was all up with him. He was young—very young—and he hadn't done much with the job. His father would have been ashamed of him. Then all his thoughts went to Her. The two men in the motor floated off and she sat there as she had sat yesterday in her marvelously pretty clothes—her little coral shoes.

He had held those bright, little feet in his hands on the Thames day; they had just filled his great hands.

Then Letty Lane, too, spirited away, and the boy's thoughts turned to the man he was to meet. "The affairs are purely formal," he had heard some one say, "an exchange of balls, without serious results."

One of his companions offered Blair a cigar. He refused, the idea sickened him. Here the gentlemen exchanged glances, and one murmured: "Is he afraid?"

The other shrugged.

"Not astonishing—he's a child."

At this Dan glanced up and smiled—what Lily, Duchess of Breakwater, had called his divine young smile. The two secretly were ashamed—he was charming.

As they got out of the motor Dan said:

"I want to ask a question of Prince Poniotowsky—if it is allowed. I'll write it on my card."

After a conference between Prince Poniotowsky's seconds and Dan's, the slip was handed the prince.

"If you get out all right, will you marry Miss Lane? I shall be glad to know."

The Hungarian, who read it under the tree, half smiled. The naivete of it, the touching youth of it, the crude lack of form—was perfect enough to touch his sense of humor. On the back of Dan's card Poniotowsky scrawled:

"Yes."

It was a haughty inclination, a salute of honor before the fight.

The meeting place was within sight of the little rustic pavilion of Les Trois Agneaux, celebrated for its pre sale and beignets; the advertisements had confronted Dan everywhere during his wanderings these miserable days.

Dan Blair and the Prince Took Their Positions, the Revolvers Raised Perpendicularly in Their Right Hands.

Under a group of chestnut trees in bright feathery flower Prince Poniotowsky and his seconds waited, their frock coats buttoned up and their gloves and silk hats in their hands. As Blair and his companions came up the others stood uncovered, grim and formal, according to the code.

Twenty-five paces. They were measured off by the four seconds, and at their signal Dan Blair and the prince took their positions, the revolvers raised perpendicularly in their right hands.

Still more indistinctly the boy saw the sharp-cut picture of it all . . . the diving bell was sinking deeper—deeper—into the sea.

"If I aim," he said to himself, "I shall kill sure—sure."

Blair heard the command: "Fire!" and supposed that after that he fired.

CHAPTER XXX.

Sodawater Fountain Girl.

His next sensation was that a warm stream flowed about his heart.

"My life's blood," he could dimly think, "my heart's blood." Redder than coral, more precious, more costly than any gift his millions could have bought her. "I've spent it for the girl I love." The stream pervaded him, caressed him, folded his limbs about, became an enchanted sea on which he floated, and its color changed from crimson to coral pale, and then to white, and became a cold, cold polar sea—and he lay on it like a frozen man, whose exploration had been in vain, and above him Greenland's icy mountains rose like emerald, on every side.

That is it—"Greenland's icy mountains." How she sang it—down—down. Her voice fell on him like magic balm. He was a little boy in church, sitting small and shy in the pew. The tune was deep and low and heavenly sweet. What a pretty mouth the soda-fountain girl had—like coral; and her eyes like gray seas. The flies buzzed, they droned so loudly that he couldn't hear her. Ah, that was terrible—he couldn't hear her.

No—no, it wouldn't do. He must hear the hymn out before he died. Buzz—buzz—drone—drone. Way down he almost heard the soft note. It was ecstasy. Sky—high up—too faint. Ah, Sodawater Fountain Girl—sing—sing—with all your heart so that it may reach his ears and charm him to those strands toward which he floats.

The expression of anguish on the young fellow's face was so heartbreaking that the doctor, his ear at Dan's lips, tried to learn what thing his poor, fading mind longed for.

From the bed's foot, where he stood, Dan's chauffeur came to the gentleman's side, and nodded:

"Right, sir, right, sir—I'll fetch Miss Lane—I'll 'ave 'er 'ere, sir—keep up, Mr. Blair."

He was going barefoot, a boy still following the plow through the mountain fields. Miles and miles stretched away before him of dark, loamy land. He saw the plow tear up the waving furrows, tossing the earth in sprinkling lines. He heard the shrill note of the phoebe bird, and looking heavenward saw it darting into the pale sky.

"What a dandy shot!" he thought, "What a bully shot!"

Prince Poniotowsky had made a good shot. . . .

Ah, there was the smell of the hayfields—no—violets that sweetly laid their petals on his lips and face. He was back again in church, lying prone before an altar. If she would only sing, he would rise again—that he knew—and her coral shoes would not dance over his grave.

He opened his eyes wide and looked into Letty Lane's. She bent over him, crying.

"Sing," he whispered.

She didn't understand.

"Sodawater Fountain Girl—if you only knew how . . . the flies buzzed, and how the droning was a living pain. . . ."

She said to Ruggles: "He wants something so heartbreakingly—what can we do?" She saw his hands stir rhythmically on the counterpane—he didn't look to her more than ten years old. . . . What a cruel thing—he was a boy just of age—a boy—

Ruggles remembered the nights he had spent before the footlights of the Gaiety, and that the pale woman trembling there weeping was a great singer.

"I guess he wants to hear you sing."

She kneeled down by him; she trembled so she couldn't stand.

The others, the doctor and Ruggles, the waiters and porters gathered in the hall, heard. No one of them understood the Gaiety girl's English words.

"From Greenland's icy mountains,
From India's coral strands . . ."

They were merciful and let him listen in peace. Through the blur in his brain, over the beat of his young ardent heart, above the short breaths the notes reached his failing senses, and lifted him—lifted him. There wasn't a very long distance between his boyhood and his twenty-two years to go, and he was not so weak but that he could travel so far.

He sat there by his father again—and heard. The flies buzzed, and he didn't mind them. The smell of the fields came in through the windows and the Sodawater Fountain Girl sang—and sang; and as she sang her face grew holy to his eyes—radiant with a beauty he had not dreamed a woman's face could wear. Above the choir rail she stood and sang peerlessly, and the church began to fade and fade, and still she stood there in a shaft of light, and her face was like an angel's, and she held her arms out to him as the waters rose to his lips. She bent and lifted him—lifted him high upon the strands. . . .

CHAPTER XXXI.

In Reality.

Dan awoke from his dream, and sat suddenly up in bed in his shirt sleeves, and stared at the people in his room—a hotel boy and two strangers, not unlike the men in his dream. He brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Sit down, will you? Do you speak English?"

They were foreigners, but they did speak English, no doubt far more perfectly than did Dan Blair.

"Look here," the boy said, "I don't know what's the matter with me—I must have had a ripping jag on last night—let me put my head in a basin of water, will you?"

He dived into the dressing-room, and came out in another second, his blond head wet, wiping his face and hair furiously with a towel. He hadn't beamed as he did now on these two strange men—for weeks.

"Well," he asked slowly, "I expect you've come to ask me to fight with Prince Poniotowsky — yes? It's against our principles, you know, in the States—we don't do that way. Personally, I'd throw anything at him I could lay my hands on, but I don't care to have him let daylight through me, and I don't care to kill your friend. See? I'm an American—yes, I know, I know," he nodded sagely, "but we don't have your kind of fights out our way. It means business when we go out to shoot."

He threw the towel down on the table, soaking wet as it was, put his hands in the pockets of his evening clothes, which he still wore, for he had not undressed, threw his young, blond head back and frankly told his visitors:

"I'm not up on swords. I've seen them in pictures and read about them, but I'll be darned if I've ever had one in my hand."

His expression changed at the quiet response of Poniotowsky's seconds.

"Gee. Whew!" he exclaimed, "he does, does he? Twenty paces—revolvers—why, he's a bird—a bird!"

A slight flush rose along Dan's cheeks. "I never liked him, and you don't want to hear what I think of him. But I'll be darned if he isn't a bird."

His eyes caught sight of a blue envelope on the table. He tore the telegram open. It was Ruggles' answer to his question:

"Quite true. Tell you about it. Arrive your hotel around noon."

The dispatch informed him that he was really a pauper and also that he had a second for his duel with Poniotowsky. His guests stood formally before the young barbarian.

"Look here," he continued amiably, "I can't meet your Dago friend like this, it's not fair. He hasn't seen me shoot; it isn't for me to say it, but I can't miss. Hold," he interrupted, "he has, too. He was at the Galoreys' at that first shoot. Ah—well, I refuse, tell him so, will you? Tell him I'm an American and a cowboy and that for me a duel at twenty paces with a pistol would mean murder. I like his pluck—it's all right—tell him anything you like. He ought to have chosen swords. He would have had me there."

They retired as formally as they had entered, and took his answer to their client, and after a bath and careful toilet Dan went out, leaving a line for Ruggles, to say that he would be at the hotel to meet him at noon.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The Prince Accepts.

The Hungarian, in the Continental, was drinking his coffee in his room when his friends found him. He listened to what they had to say coolly. His eye-glass gave him an air of full dress even at this early hour. Poniotowsky had not fallen into a deep sleep and had a dream as Dan Blair had—indeed he had only reached his room the night before when a letter had been brought him from Miss Lane. He was used to her caprices, which were countless, and he never left her with any certainty that he should see her again, or with any idea of what her next move would be. The letter read:

"It's no use. I just can't. I've always told you so, and I mean it. I'm tired out—I want to go away and never see any one again. I want to die. I shall be dead next year, and I don't care. Please leave me alone and don't come to see me, and for heaven's sake don't bore me with notes."

When Poniotowsky received this note he had shrugged, and decided that if he lived after his duel with the young savage he would go to see the actress, taking a jewel or a gift—he would get her a Pomeranian dog, and all would be well. He listened coolly to what his friends had to say.

"C'est un enfant," one of them remarked sneeringly.

"In my mind, he is a coward," said the other.

"On the contrary," answered Poniotowsky coolly, "he shoots to perfection. You will be surprised to hear that I admire his refusal. I accept his decision, as his skill is unquestioned with arms. I choose to look upon this reply as an apology. I would like to have you inform Mr. Blair of this fact. He's young enough to be my son and he is a barbarian. The incident is closed."

He put Letty Lane's note in his pocket, and leisurely prepared to go out on the Rue de Castiglione to buy her a Pomeranian dog.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Things Above Ground.

Higgins let him in, and across the room Blair saw the figure of the actress against the light of the long window. Her back was to him as he came up, and though she knew who it was, she was far from dreaming how different a man it was that came in to see her this morning from the one she had known.

"Won't you turn around and bid me goodby?" he asked her. "I'm going away."

She gave him a languid hand without looking at him.

"Has Higgins gone?"

"Yes. Won't you turn round and say how-de-do, and good-by? Gosh," he cried as she turned, "how pale you are, darling." And he took her in his arms.

The vision he had had of her in her coral-colored dress at Maxim's gave place to the more radiant one which had shone on him in his curious dream.

"Are you very ill?" he murmured. "Speak to me—tell me—are you going to die?"

"Don't be a goose, boy."

"I've had a wire from Ruggles," Dan said; "he tells me it's true. I have nothing but my own feet to stand on, and I'm as poor as Job's turkey." Looking at her impressively, he added, "I only mind because it will be hard on you."

"Hard on me?"

"Yes, you'll have to start poor. Mother did with father, out there in Montana. It will be rough at first, but other have done it and been happy, and we've got each other." The eyes fixed on her were as blue as the summer skies. "Money's a darned poor thing to buy happiness with, Letty. It didn't buy me a thing fit to keep, that's the truth. I've never been so gay since I was born as I am today. Why, I feel," he said, and would have stretched out his arms, only he held her with them, "like a king. Later I'll have money again, all right—don't fret—and then I'll know its worth. I'll bet you weren't all unhappy there in Blairtown before you turned the heads of all those Johnnies." He put one hand against her cheek and lifted her drooping head. "Lean on me, sweetheart," he said with great tenderness. "It will be all right."

A coral color stole along her cheek; it rose like a sweet tide under his hand. She looked at him, fascinated.

"It's not a real tragedy," he went on. "I've got my letter of credit, and old Ruggles will let me hang on to that, and you'll find the motor cars and jewels will look like thirty cents when we stand in the door of our little shack and look out at the Value Mine." He lifted her hand to his lips, held it there, and the spark ignited in her; his youth and confidence, his force and passion, woke a woman in Letty Lane that had never lived before that hour.

He murmured: "I'll be there with you, darling—night and day—night and day.

She found breath to say, "What has happened to you, Dan—what?"

"I don't know," he gravely replied. "I guess I came up pretty close against it last night; things got into their right places, and then and there I knew you were the girl for me, and I the man for you, rich or poor."

He kissed her and she passively received his caresses, so passively, so without making him any sign, that his magnificent assurance began to be shaken—his arms fell from her.

"It's quite true," he murmured, "I am poor."

She led him to the lounge and made him sit down by her. He waited for her to speak, but she remained silent, her eyes fixed on her frail hands, ringless—tears forced themselves under her eyelids, but she kept them back.

"I guess," she said in a veiled tone, "you've no idea all I've been through, Dan, since I stood there in the church choir."

American though he was, and down on foreign customs—he wouldn't fight a duel—he got down on his knees and put his arms around her from there.

"I know what you are, all right Letty. You are an angel."

She gave way and burst into tears and hid her face on his shoulder, and sobbed.

"I believe you do—I believe you do. You've saved my soul and my life. I'll go with you—I'll go—I'll go!"

Later she told him how she would learn to cook and sew, and that together they would stand in the door of their shack at sunset, or that she would stand and watch for him to come home; and, the actress in her strong, she sprang up for a minute and stood shielding her eyes with her slender hand to show him how. And he gazed, charmed at her, and drew her back to him again.

"You've made dad's words come true." Dan wouldn't tell her what they were—he said she wouldn't understand. "I nearly had to die to learn them myself," he said.

She leaned toward him, a slight shadow crossed her face as if memories laid a darkling wing for a moment there. Such shadows must have passed, for she kissed him of her own accord on the lips and without a sigh.

Side by side they sat for a long time. Higgins softly opened a door and saw them, and stepped back, unheard.

Ruggles came in, and his steps in the soft carpet made no sound; and he looked at the pair long and tenderly before he spoke. They sat there before him like children, holding hands.

Letty Lane's hat lay on the floor. Her hair was a halo around her pale, charming face; she had caught youth from the boy, she was laughing like a girl—they were making plans. And as the subject was Love, and there was no money in the question, and as there was sacrifice on the part of each, it is safe to think that old Dan Blair's son was planning to purchase those things that stay above ground and persist in the hearts of us all.

THE END.

KEENAN WINS OVER SHAND.

Second Primary for Columbia Councilman Held.

Columbia, May 7.—R. C. Keenan, incumbent, was nominated for council here today in the second municipal election over R. W. Shand, also a member of council. P. S. Earle was elected in the first primary, held several days ago.

Mr. Keenan's majority over Mr. Shand was over 300 votes.